A CHAPLAIN'S RELATIONSHIP TO CIVIL RELIGION

SubCourse 85

Writing Skills

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The duties, responsibilities, and interests of the military chaplain are many and varied. We have specific duties to the commander on religion and morale. We are to conduct services of worship, provide religious coverage for the unit, and offer pastoral care and counseling. We are to be with the troops and serve as their pastor. We have a responsibility of representing our denomination and being loyal to our particular affiliation.

The chaplain also has a relationship to Civil Religion. We are not necessarily categorized as the only clergy persons related to Civil Religion, nor are we to be primarily promoters of Civil Religion. We do have a unique relationship, which I would like to explore.

CIVIL RELIGION, DEFINED

Civil Religion is more than patriotic piety or a distilled version of the best of all religions. This is not a call for the chaplain to represent a religious consensus or the American Way of Life.

Now that I have discounted some fears and objections which may have flashed through your mind, let me move to focus more clearly on understanding Civil Religion.

Over the past two decades, much has been written about Civil Religion in America. The term comes from Rousseau's Social Contracts in which he outlines some specific dogmas of Civil Religion. Robert Bellah, Russell Richey, Martin Marty, Sidney Mead, and many others have particular understandings of the subject. Russell Richey and Donald Jones point to five broad meanings of Civil Religion. I will list and briefly summarize these five broad meanings to help us conceptualize Civil Religion.

"First is the notion of Civil Religion as folk religion. By examining the actual life, ideas, values, ceremonies, and loyalties of the people, conclusions are drawn as to the existence and status of Civil Religion. The starting point is not a normative view of what Civil Religion at best is, but what it actually is on the basis of surveys, polls, and emperical studies."[1] Thus Civil Religion emerges out of society with no transcendence of that society.

"A second meaning of Civil Religion may be categorized as the transcendent universal religion of the nation."[2] This understanding is normative and is a judgment upon the folk religionist. "It is at best a universal and transcendent religion rendering prophetic judgment on the nation. It functions as a source of meaning and social solidarity for the nation."[3]

"A third meaning of the category, Civil Religion, is indicated by the phrase 'religious nationalism'."[4] The nation becomes "the object of adoration and glorification. The nation takes on a sovereign and self transcendent character. Some have called this ... the religion of patriotism."[5]

"A fourth meaning of Civil Religion may be designated as the democratic faith. The humane values and ideals of equality, freedom, and justice, without necessary dependence on a transcendent duty or a spiritualized nation, represent civil religion at its best in the American experience."[6]

"A fifth meaning of Civil Religion may be called Protestant Civil Piety."[7] This brings together protestantism and nationalism. Protestant moralism, individualism, activism, and the work ethic are natural emphases

of this meaning. While Jones and Richey have tried to give some clarity and particularities to the concept, most writers on the subject affirm the rather unique history of our nation. They also see some fundamental religious characteristics which were involved in our national development and continue to be operative in our life as a nation.

Sidney Mead elaborated on these characteristics in a published article entitled, "The Nation with the Soul of a Church," in which he traces the development of 'church and state.' The church is pluralistic in America; no sect is greater nor less than another. The state conceived in liberty and justice for all is neutral, neither aiding nor hindering any religious group. But the state is viewed as being under God. During the early days, many civil and religious leaders saw the republic as the agent of God's activity in history.

More currently Robert Bellah points to the transcendent prophetic aspects of Civil Religion as a sense of judgment entering the American scene. In "The Broken Covenant," Bellah traces the major times of trial for the nation. All of these crises for the nation are a test of the principles of justice and liberty. There are three: (1) Independence (liberty and justice for a nation);(2) the Civil War (will liberty and justice be for all citizens); and (3) currently (will our institutions adapt to retain justice and order at home and in the world).[8] Bellah is very much concerned about food and energy and the way we re-organize ourselves for the common good of us all. (BSC Lecture)

Relation to Chaplain

One of the reasons I feel the chaplain has a relationship to Civil Religion is that our ministry is in an ecumenical environment. We work with other chaplains and other persons of different denominations and faiths. Some of us may have many elements of religion in common, but all of us share in the religious heritage of our nation.

The second relationship is the national concerns and ideals we share. The military serves as a defense for our commitment to justice and liberty for all citizens. There is no greater national interest than these American concepts of justice and liberty. We are ready to celebrate these and to admit judgment upon us as we have failed to live up to these concepts as a nation. America is a test ground for the great experiments of liberty and justice and these concepts must fair well in our parish and our land.

A third is for the chaplain to recognize the destructive elements of Civil Religion. For example, the concept of Civil Religion as religious nationalism can be dangerous. The view that the nation can do no wrong is a trap. President Nixon developed his White House worship services as a part of religious nationalism. He did this at a crucial time in our history. He was trying to bring peace with honor out of Viet Nam. He was proclaiming an individual self reliance but lack of concern for all the people, especially the weaker brothers of our Nation, which was clearly lacking in his second inaugural address. Mr. Nixon had lost the best of Civil Religion; its transcendence upon the nation, its call for the common good in liberty and justice. The chaplain can understand that the state is not all glorious, even though we have some great and wonderful

concepts for the well-being of persons. We do participate in other allegiancies ... our own faith ... which tends to limit and restrict the predominance of Civil Religion.

Footnotes

1. Russell E. Richey and Donald G. Jones, American Civil Religion. (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1974), p. 15.

2. Ibid., p. 15.

3. Ibid., p. 16.

4. Ibid., p. 16.

5. Ibid., p. 16.

6. Ibid., p. 17.

7. Ibid., p. 17.

8. Robert N. Bellah, The Broken Covenant (New York: the Seabury Press, 1975), p. 1.

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Bellah, Robert N. The Broken Covenant. New York: Seabury Press, 1975.

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